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ON

[ GAO'S ROLE IN MAKING  
INFORMATION MANAGEMENT WORK ]  
CONFERENCE ON THE PAPERWORK  
REDUCTION ACT OF 1980

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

MAY 5, 1981

WASHINGTON D.C.

I am pleased to be with you today to discuss what I see as GAO's role in implementing the information resources management principles established by the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980. GAO in general, and my Division in particular, participated extensively in efforts leading to passage of Public Law 96-511 and we plan to continue our efforts to aid in its implementation, consistent with the wishes of the Congress.

Before I get into my discussion, I believe I should provide a brief orientation about my Division's role within GAO as it relates to the act and perhaps a little disclaimer from my billing as a "Congressional Keynote Speaker."

Taking the last part first, I would simply say that I cannot speak for the Congress, any of its Committees or any of its Members. Anyone in GAO who purports to do so should be financially independent and have their resignation or retirement papers prepared. Since I am not financially independent and hope to

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continue for a while in a job I enjoy very much, I felt I should make that point clear.

My Division has been given the task of serving as the focal point for GAO's audit and evaluation efforts which relate to P.L. 96-511. That does not mean that my staff will either perform or supervise all of GAO's work related to the act. It does mean that we will attempt to coordinate and focus both our own work and that of other GAO Divisions directed toward implementation of the various information elements of the legislation.

Now, I'd like to discuss with you how we view the Paperwork Reduction Act, trace briefly some of the events leading up to its passage, and highlight key elements of the act which we will give particular attention in the near future.

The Paperwork Reduction Act is, of course, much more than the title implies. Those of you who have been in the information management area or who followed the legislation as it moved through Congress, are well aware of the broad-based information management policy document which emerged.

While the legislation initially stemmed from a growing concern about paperwork burdens imposed on the public, during the legislative process Congress recognized the broader issues associated with the collection, use, dissemination, and disposal of information and the new technology available to do those things faster, better, and cheaper.

These issues and concerns were supported by numerous studies and reports from a wide variety of sources, all of which had recommended improvements in Federal information management. Taken together,

these studies painted a picture of ineffective information management practices ranging from lack of control over paperwork burdens to wasteful ADP procurements.

Although other studies played an important role, the Commission on Federal Paperwork probably should be credited with surfacing many of the needed reforms addressed in the Paperwork Act. The Commission's wide range of studies justifiably captured a great deal of attention in the Congress, and provided a catalyst for legislative action which had previously been lacking.

The Paperwork Commission's report entitled Information Resources Management appears to have laid the conceptual framework for much of what we see in P.L. 96-511. This report set forth the idea that information is a resource which should be managed. It also pointed out the relationships between the different elements of information management -- paperwork burden control, statistics, ADP, records management, and so forth -- and recommended consolidating these separate functions into a coherent information resources management system.

These ideas and concepts are now beginning to be implemented. But, I think everyone would agree that we are just beginning a long and difficult task. With that in mind, I'd like to highlight for you what we see as three key elements of P.L. 96-511. We will be giving a great deal of attention to these areas in the weeks and months to come.

The first item --and, in our view -- the one upon which everything else depends, is the establishment of a strong central

management structure in OMB. This structure is to include the authority, responsibility, and accountability for promulgating sound information management policies and for overseeing the Departments' and agencies' implementation of those policies.

The legislation provides for this kind of structure-- centered around the concepts of information resources management I discussed earlier. Within OMB, policy and oversight responsibility for the various information management activities is consolidated in the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA). The Office is headed by an appointee of the OMB Director; however, the Director will be held accountable for exercising the Office's functions.

GAO strongly supported the creation of this strong central management structure. We believe it is essential if the objectives of economy and efficiency in managing Federal information activities are to be achieved. The words in the legislation are all there. But they won't make it happen. Only the people in OMB and the agencies can do that.

The second essential element of P.L. 96-511 is implementing its charter of responsibilities for the Departments and agencies. The act calls for a senior official to be designated in each agency who will report directly to the agency head and be held responsible for managing all information activities. Although the law does not specifically mandate that the agency offices be identical to the OMB office, it is clear that there was the intent for a high degree of compatibility.

The act requires that agency senior officials be designated by July 1. We understand that OMB expects to issue guidance to assist the agencies in this effort in the near future. We will be observing these efforts with great interest, and hope that there is clear understanding that a perfunctory designation, followed by business as usual, is not what the Congress intends.

A third item we intend to emphasize during the next several months is an assessment of opportunities for applying information technology to reduce costs and improve service delivery. Many Federal agencies have successfully applied modern information technology to enhance their ability to carry out their missions. We believe that additional opportunities exist and will devote a substantial amount of resources to identifying them as the implementation of P.L. 96-511 proceeds. We hope that our work will stimulate sustained efforts of this type by OMB, the Departments and agencies.

Now, I'd like to elaborate a little on what I see as GAO's role in helping make information management work in the Federal Government. Essentially, we see that as synonymous with making P.L. 96-511 work. Perhaps it would be useful to outline GAO's involvement in the efforts leading to passage of P.L. 96-511, as I believe that background is essential to understanding GAO's strong commitment to the principles embodied in the legislation.

The roots of GAO's involvement in the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 can be traced back as far as 1973. The Trans-Alaska Pipeline Act--enacted in November 1973--included a non-germane

rider which amended the old Federal Reports Act by shifting responsibility for forms clearance for independent regulatory agencies from OMB to GAO.

We believed at the time that was a mistake, because we felt that it put GAO into a role which was inconsistent with our basic mission of performing audits and evaluations for the Congress. We said so, but the climate of the times was such that nobody listened.

Soon, however, several Members of Congress became increasingly concerned with the issue of the growing paperwork burdens on the public. In 1975, under the leadership of Congressman Frank Horton, the bipartisan Commission on Federal Paperwork began a 2-year study with--as Congressman Horton put it--the objective of "identifying the root causes of paperwork burdens."

GAO was heavily involved in the Paperwork Commission's efforts by virtue of former Comptroller General Staats' membership on the Commission. Consequently, after the Commission's work was completed it seemed perfectly natural that Comptroller General Staats and Congressman Horton would agree that GAO staff should take a stab at drafting legislation to implement the Commission's recommendations for centralizing and strengthening the paperwork control process and the statistical policy function. The latter activity had been shifted from OMB to the Department of Commerce.

To summarize a lot of effort, I'll just say that GAO staff began our initial legislative drafting efforts in February 1978

and we had staff assigned to various versions of what eventually emerged as P.L. 96-511 right on through the day it was signed.

I don't mean to suggest that GAO is due any special credit-- or blame--for the development and passage of P.L. 96-511. Other people and organizations played the key roles in the legislative process, as they properly should. I do mean to state that GAO believes in the principles of P.L. 96-511, willingly invested its resources to support the Congress in its passage and, at the continuing request of the Congress, will invest its resources to assist in implementation.

In summary, GAO will be heavily involved in assessing for the Congress the progress toward implementing the Paperwork Reduction Act. Our first reviews will focus on OMB and agency efforts to develop policies, establish organizational structures, and take advantage of opportunities to apply information technology, for improved service and reduced costs. Future reviews will focus on the various milestones spelled out in the legislation. We will also continue to perform reviews directed toward evaluating specific information management elements such as paperwork burden control, issues related to ADP acquisitions, records management problems and so forth.

We believe the Paperwork Reduction Act is landmark legislation with tremendous potential for improving the Federal Government's information management activities. Achieving that potential will, however, be very difficult. If those of us who supported the legislation behave as if the task is over, it will, in fact be over -- without any results.

I am reminded of a recent response by Mr. Staats when asked by a Senate committee how best to try and identify management improvement needs in Government. He said, "It isn't something you can think about once a year and expect it to work. Good management is something that has to happen every day."

The Paperwork Reduction Act establishes a comprehensive structure for Federal information resources management. We at GAO intend to do our part every day to help make it work.

Thank you. I'd be happy to take your questions.